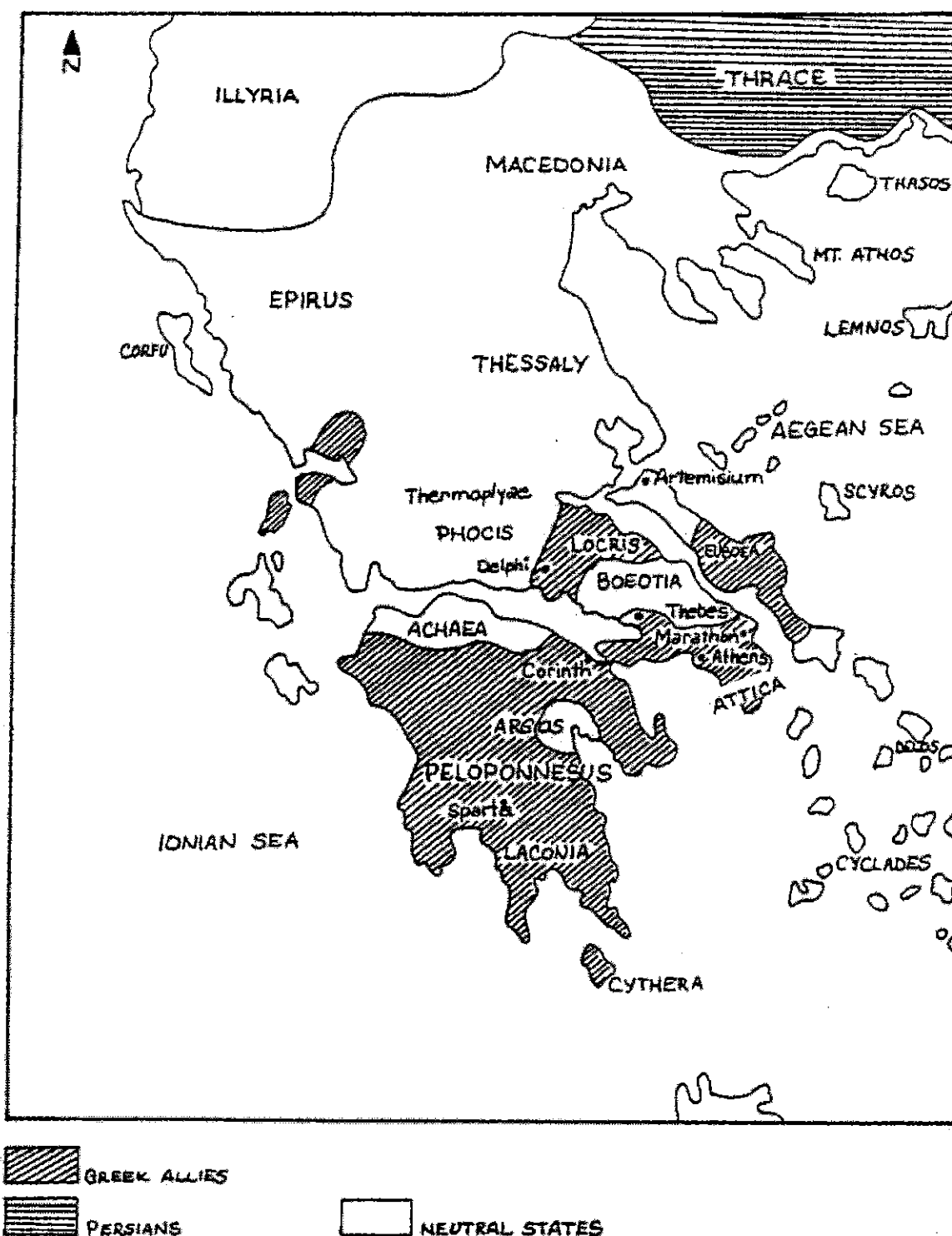


Map of Greece During the Persian Wars



The Persian Wars

Until 490 B.C. most Greek city-states had fought only small, local battles against their neighbors. But at this time, they were suddenly threatened by the vast Persian Empire, one of the largest empires ever known. It extended from Egypt to the borderlands of India, and from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea, an area of over 2,000,000 square miles.

Our story about this very dramatic and glorious period in Greek history comes from **Herodotus** (hih-ROD-uh-tus), who is considered to have been the first historian (484-425 B.C.). He is the first western writer to use the word *historia* (inquiry). Remember, however, as our story unfolds, that in spite of his attempts to chronicle Greek history accurately, that he is our only source for this period and many historians today believe that he often exaggerated the disadvantages of the Greeks in the battles which he describes. In addition, he believed that the gods had a strong role in determining outcomes.

Our story begins like this. In 492 B.C. **Darius** (DUH-ry-us), Emperor of Persia, sent messengers to all the Greek city-states demanding that they submit to his authority. He did this because he had been facing a revolt by the Greek cities in Asia Minor which already had been conquered and made part of his empire. Athens and a few other Greek cities sent them aid, which angered Darius. After he had crushed the revolt in Asia Minor, he demanded token gifts of "earth and water," (to symbolize obedience), from each of the Greek states on mainland. According to Herodotus, the Athenians threw the Persian messengers in a pit, suggesting that they collect their own earth, and the Spartans threw them into a well, suggesting they collect their own water!

THE BATTLE OF MARATHON

Darius was understandably displeased with all this and in 490 B.C. he struck. He sent an army escorted by a fleet of 600 ships to the plain of **Marathon**, just 26 miles outside of Athens. At the battle which ensued, the Athenian army, without the aid of Sparta which was engaged in religious ceremonies and refused to send aid, defeated the mighty Persians and routed them back into the sea. How did this little city defeat one of the world's largest empires? The story has it that **Miltiades**, the Athenian **strategos** (general), created a last minute, but brilliant and flawless, plan. He persuaded the Athenians to seize the initiative and march to Marathon before the Persian cavalry could get there. The Athenians, realizing that they had only the Plataeans as allies, and that the Spartans would not make it in time, attacked the Persian troops at dawn rather than waiting for the Spartans to join them. Not only did they rush in and surprise the Persian cavalry, but Miltiades's strategy of surrounding the Persians from the flanks and thinning his center ranks threw the Persians into mass confusion.

Herodotus
(Primary Source)

The word was given to move, and the Athenians advanced at a run towards the enemy, not less than a mile away. The Persians, seeing the attack developing at the double, prepared to meet it confidently enough, for it seemed to them suicidal madness for the Athenians to risk an assault with so small a force—at the double too, and with no support from either cavalry or archers. Nevertheless, the Athenians came on; closed with the enemy all along the line, and fought in a way not to be forgotten. . . .

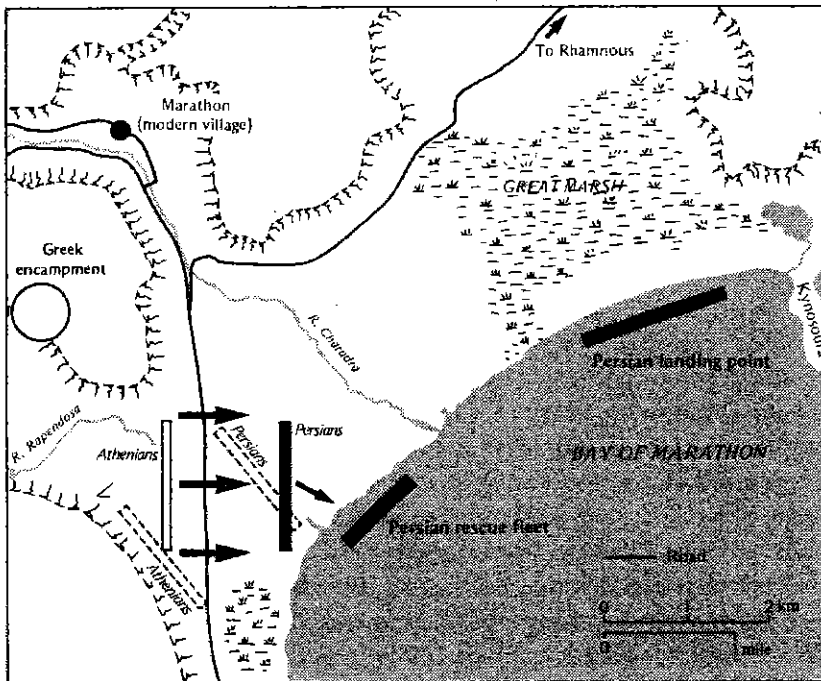
The struggle at Marathon was long drawn out. In the center . . . the advantage was with the foreigners, who were so far successful as to break the Greek line and pursue the fugitives inland from the sea; but the Athenians on one wing and the Plataeans on the other were both victorious. Having got the upper hand, they left the defeated Persians to make their escape, and then, drawing the two wings together into a single unit, they turned their attention to the Persians who had broken through in the center. Here again they were triumphant, chasing the routed enemy, and cutting them down as they ran right to the edge of the sea.

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In the battle of Marathon some 6400 Persians were killed; the losses of the Athenians were 192. (Plataeans were killed as well, but Herodotus was Athenian and only glorified the Athenian dead in his account of the battle.)

Supposedly, a messenger called **Pheidippides** was sent to Athens to spread the word about this extraordinary victory and the messenger, having run the 26 miles with such urgency and excitement, dropped dead after telling his story. (From this incident, the founders of the modern Olympics created the famous marathon run of 26 miles.) In addition, the dead of Marathon were buried in a great commemorative mound, which can be seen today.

After this enormous victory, the Greeks had a ten year respite from Persian attack. **Themistocles** (thuh-MIS-tuh-kleez) now became the leading figure in Athenian democracy. He felt that the future of Athens lay in sea-power. When a rich vein of silver was found in the Southern part of Attica, he persuaded the Athenian Assembly to expand the navy with this money, rather than divide the new wealth among themselves which was the usual custom. Fortunately for the Greeks, this was accomplished before **Xerxes** (CERK-seez), son of Darius, made a fresh attempt to conquer them in 480 B.C.



The Battle of Marathon

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THE BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE

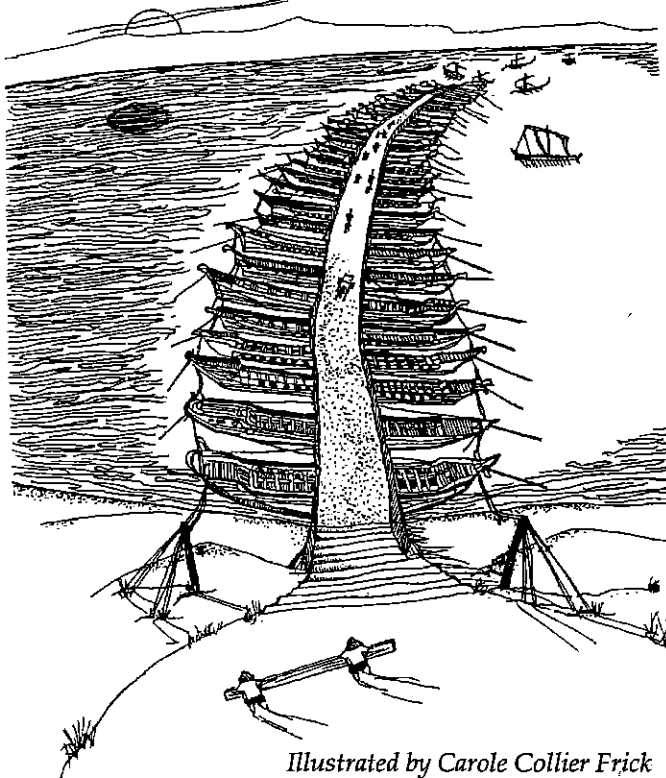
Xerxes had devised an elaborate plan for conquering Greece. He constructed two pontoon bridges made up of over 300 boats lashed together, so that his huge army could cross the straits of the Hellespont.

Herodotus (Primary Source)

The method employed was as follows; galleys and triremes were lashed together to support the bridges - 360 vessels for the one on the Black Sea side, and 314 for the other. They were moored head-on to the current in order to lessen the strain on the cables. Gaps were left in three places to allow any boats that might wish to do so to pass in or out of the Black Sea. Once the vessels were in position the cables were hauled taut by wooden winches ashore. The next operation was to cut planks equal in length to the width of the floats, lay them edge to edge over the taut cables and then bind them together. That done, brushwood was put on top and spread evenly, with a layer of soil, trodden hard, over all. Finally a paling was constructed along each side, high enough to prevent horses and mules from seeing over and taking fright at the water.

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Xerxes Bridge at the Hellespont



When news of these elaborate invasion plans reached the Greeks, they met and agreed to give Sparta command over the land forces and Athens command over the naval forces. Together they decided to withdraw to a pass called **Thermopylae** (thur-MOP-uh-lee), just 75 miles northwest of Athens. Here, again, the Greeks fought one of the most heroic battles in history. Again Herodotus describes the battle. A Persian spy reported to Xerxes that the Spartans were practicing gymnastics and combing their hair. Xerxes was puzzled by such behavior and when he asked for an explanation he was told that:

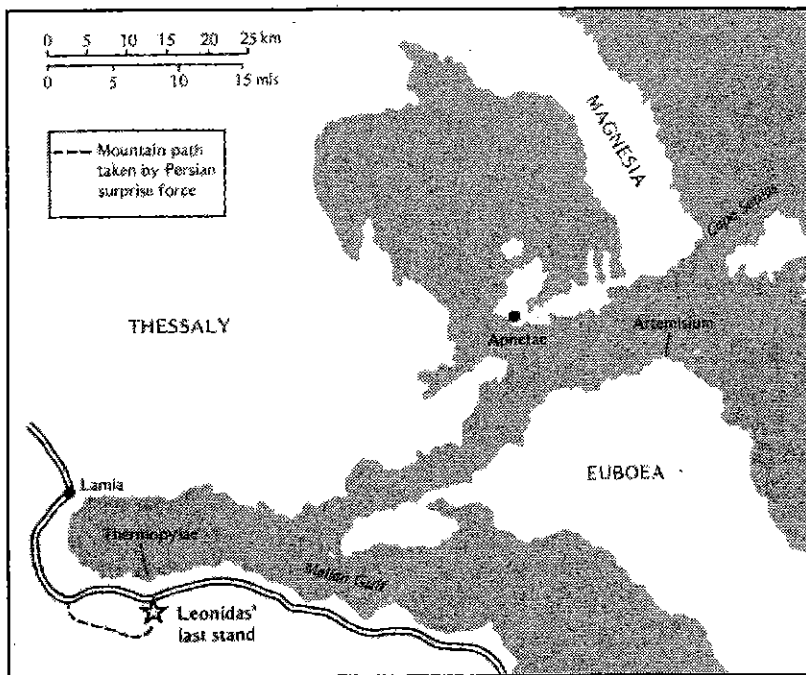
Herodotus (Primary Source)

These men have to fight with us for the pass, and are now preparing themselves to do so; for such is their custom, when they are going to hazard their lives, then they dress their heads; but be assured, if you conquer these men, and those that remain in Sparta, there is no other nation in the world that will dare to raise their hand against you, O king; for you are now to engage with the noblest kingdom and the city of all among the Greeks, and with the most valiant men.

Source: George Rawlinson, trans. "Herodotus" in Francis R. B. Godolphin, ed., *The Greek Historians* (New York, Random House, 1942).

However, a Greek traitor showed the Persians a way through the mountains and they struck the Spartans from the rear. Leonidas, the Spartan general, fought with 300 Spartans and their allies. In this battle Leonidas and all of his troops were slain. Xerxes now ordered his army to occupy Athens, while the fleet followed along the coast. Thermopylae has always been a symbol of heroic struggle against overwhelming odds.

The Battle of Thermopylae



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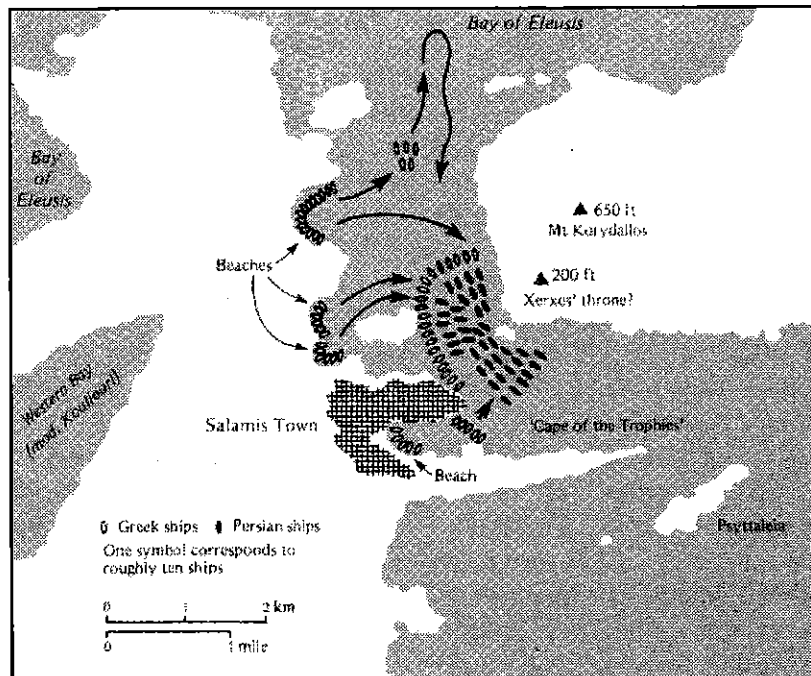
THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS

Themistocles decided to evacuate Athens of women and children. He proposed this time to engage the enemy at sea. He tricked the Persians into attacking the Greeks off the island of Salamis (SAL-ah-mis), near Athens. The Persian ships greatly outnumbered the Athenians' and their ships were much larger. However, in this small bay with storms blowing, these were disadvantages for the Persians. The Persian ships hit up against each other and their oars became entangled. This led to confusion and the Persians were eventually forced to retreat. Greek losses numbered 40 ships while 200 Persian vessels were sunk. Also, high morale and defending one's own territory were huge advantages for the Greeks. Themistocles said it the most poetically:

"Their rowers are slaves seeking freedom and our rowers are Greeks seeking to preserve their freedom. We know the inlets and the coastline, the waters and the winds."

The dramatist **Aeschylus** (ESS-kih-lus), an Athenian playwright who was born in 525 B.C. and fought at Marathon and Salamis, gave account of the battle of Salamis in his play, *The Persians* (see facing page).

The Battle of Salamis



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The Persians
(Primary Source)

When at last the sun's bright chariot rose,
then we could hear them—singing; loud and strong
rang back the echo from the island rocks,
and with the sound came the first chill of fear. . . .
Then trumpets over there set all on fire;
then the sea foamed as oars struck all together,
and swiftly, there they were! The right wing first
led on the ordered line, then all the rest
came on, came out, and now was to be heard
a mighty shouting: 'On, sons of the Greeks!
Set free your country, set your children free,
your wives, the temples of your country's gods,
your father's tombs; now they are all at stake.'
And from our side the Persian battle-cry
roared back the answer; and the time was come.
Then ship on ship rammed with her beak of bronze;
but first a Greek struck home; full on the quarter
she struck and shattered a Phoenician's planks;
then all along the line the fight was joined.
. . . those Greek ships,
skilfully handled, kept the outer station
ringing us round and striking in, till ships
turned turtle, and you could not see the water
for blo and wreckage; and the dead were strewn
thickly on all the beaches, all the reefs;
and every ship in all the fleet of Asia
in grim confusion fought to get away.

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THE BATTLE OF PLATAEA

After the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C., Xerxes himself returned home to take care of his empire. However, he left a large army under his general, Mardonius, occupying central Greece and Boeotia on the Athenian border. Mardonius attempted to divide the League of Greek States in order to defeat them. He sent an ambassador to Athens offering the Athenians all the territory they wanted if they would join him. He assumed they might because Athens was in the most vulnerable position of all the Greek states. However, the Athenians refused his offer for the following reasons given so eloquently by Herodotus:

Herodotus
(Primary Source)

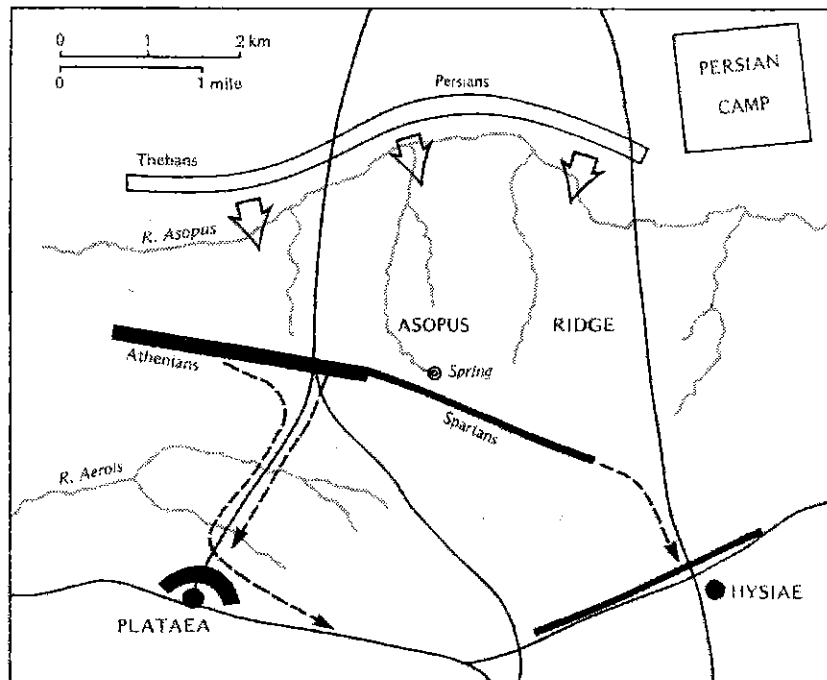
... Not all the gold that the whole earth contains—would bribe us to take part with the (Persians) and help them to enslave the Greeks. Even could we anyhow have brought ourselves to such a thing, there are many very powerful motives which would now make it impossible. The first and chief of these is the burning and destruction of our temples and the images of our gods, which forces us to make no terms with their destroyer, but rather to pursue him with our resentment to the uttermost. Again, there is our common brotherhood with the Greeks: our common ancestry and language, the altars and the sacrifices of which we bear—did the Athenians betray all these, of a truth it would not be well. Know then now, if you have not known it before, that while one Athenian remains alive we will never join alliance with Xerxes. . . .

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The Athenians then called upon the Spartans and their other allies for aid. The Spartan armies marched northwards to join the Athenians and the combined army of all the Greek states advanced to attack the Persians at Plataea. Mardonius was killed and the Persians were finally defeated in this summer campaign of 479 B.C. The Persians were forced to withdraw from Greece and the Persian invasion of Greece was finally over.

The battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea have for 2500 years represented humankind's never ending quest to be free. Having finally rid themselves of the Persian threat, the Athenians now entered into a period of such pride that they embarked upon one of the greatest flowerings of philosophy, culture and the arts ever known to mankind. At the same time their pride led them to persuade 350 of the Greek city-states to form an alliance to continue the war against Persia, based on the island of Delos, which came to be known as the Delian League. In 454 B.C. the League's treasury was moved to Athens and the League was transformed into the Athenian Empire.

The Battle of Plataea



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Chart: Persian Wars

	Marathon	Thermopylae	Salamis	Plataea
Date				
Topography				
Combatants				
Strategy				
Who Won?				
Why?				
Consequences				